

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – May 23 - 27, 2011  
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In the United States there has been a debate since the 1970s about invented signing systems called Manually Coded English (MCE) published as various formal signed English systems for example, Seeing Essential English (known as SEE<sup>1</sup>) or Signing Exact English (SEE<sup>2</sup>). There has also been a naturally occurring variety of English-based signing which was called “pidgin sign English” but has been more recently and more accurately called a contact dialect of American Sign Language. This naturally occurring variety of English-like signing has been part of American Sign Language since ASL developed in the early 1800s. It is the result of contact between deaf signers and hearing and the strong influence that a majority language like English has on a minority language in a bilingual context.

Now to the question for this week....

The situation described above of invented systems that attempt to create a code of the spoken language and naturally occurring contact varieties of the national sign language is unique to the United States. True or False

Scroll down for the answer.

Answer: “false” – The creation of manual codes to represent spoken language through signing for educational purposes and the natural mixing of national sign languages with the spoken language to create contact dialects seem to be a phenomenon that occurs frequently where ever sign languages exist. And especially occur in countries where sign language is used formally within the educational systems of those countries. For evidence of this, see the following descriptions of country specific sign languages:

### Japanese Sign Language

“Japanese Sign Language is distinct from spoken/written Japanese in both grammar and lexicon, although many Deaf signers will use Manually Coded Japanese / Pidgin Signed Japanese when signing to hearing or non-native JSL signers. The grammatical system shares many similarities with other national sign languages in its use of the complex visual space available, classifiers, and other complex forms.” (Nakamura, Karen (2002) "About Japanese Sign Language." Web site. <<http://www.deaflibrary.org/jsl.html>>)

### German Sign Language

German Sign Language is unrelated to spoken German. The two have very different grammars, though as the dominant language of the region, German has had some influence on German Sign Language. A signed system that represents the German language has been developed, which is known as "Signed German" (Lautsprachbegleitende Gebärden, Lautbegleitende Gebärden or LBG, meaning "sound-accompanying signs"). It is rarely used as a natural means of communication between deaf people. Another system of manually representing German is cued speech, known as "Phonembestimmtes Manualsystem" (Phonemic Manual System). Similar systems that represent the English language are known as Manually Coded English. (Cited from: <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German\\_Sign\\_Language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/German_Sign_Language)>, May 21, 2011)

### Italian Sign Language

Like many signed languages, ISL is in some ways different from its "spoken neighbor"; thus, it has little in common with spoken Italian, but shares some features with non-Indo-European oral languages (e.g. it is verb final, like the Basque language; it has inclusive and exclusive pronominal forms like oceanic languages; interrogative particles are verb final (*You go where?*)).

A sign variety of spoken Italian also exists, the so-called Signed Italian (Italiano Segnato) which combines ISL lexicon with the grammar of spoken Italian: this is not Italian Sign Language, however. (Cited from: (Cited from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian\\_Sign\\_Language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian_Sign_Language))

Researching the national sign languages of other countries you will often see distinctions being made between the naturally occurring variety of signing and a variety that combines signs with the spoken language of the country. The situation is not unique to the United States.

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